

Infants & Toddlers: Getting To Know Babies' Temperaments

Getting to Know Me!: From the day they're born, children differ remarkably in personality. Here's what you need to know about babies' temperaments

By Alice Sterling Honig

Infants usually show one of three major temperaments, and each calls for particular insights and attention.

Cautious Babies

Some babies are just very hesitant, approaching new foods, new teachers, and new situations with wariness. Cautious babies may exhibit lower activity and more somber moods, even if they are securely attached to you and their parents. If pushed or urged too much, shy, tentative babies pull back and may look scared.

Fussy Babies

Some babies are very sensitive. Getting to sleep or waking up may cause them distress. These babies are often irritable. They are sensitive to touch or to any change in position, such as during diapering, and respond with intense crying to small changes in routines. These are infants who take a long time to adapt, responding to daily separations with extreme distress. These babies can be frustrating to care for, especially when there are several infants in one environment. Since they have difficulty managing body rhythms, it is harder to predict when they are hungry, sleepy, or need a diaper change. Always try to remember that a fussy baby is not "spoiled" if she cries every day when left in your care. She is responding to her own discomfort. Offer generous caresses.

Easygoing Babies

Easygoing babies are often in a pleasant mood. They tend to have more regular body rhythms (such as eating and sleeping) and a moderate activity level. Rather than avoiding new experiences, as the cautious baby does, an easygoing infant will often welcome new situations, new foods, or a new classroom aide. These babies adapt easily to routines and to change.

Because she doesn't cry or fuss much, she may not be getting as much attention as those babies who do. So be sure that easygoing babies get plenty of personal attention from you throughout the day. Offer them lots of cuddles, smile at them from across the classroom, and send admiring glances their way.

Toddlers and Temperaments

Temperament styles differ remarkably among toddlers. The three most prevalent are fearful/shy; irritable/active/fussy; and easy. Don't expect the fearful toddler to join readily in a group activity. Take him to the activity and stay there until he seems adjusted

to the new situation. Step back as you pick up cues that he is comfortable and well engaged with the materials or his playmates.

Gather up lots of patience, and try to keep a good sense of humor when caring for fussy toddlers. Developing a calm acceptance of the reality of a child's particular temperament also helps.

When all the teachers in the classroom tune in to individual temperaments, you will find ways to help each child flourish. ECT

Caring for Fussy Infants and Toddlers

By Alice Sterling Honig

Infants:

Minimize the number of persons caring for the baby. If a baby seems fearful of strangers, such as volunteers or new teacher assistants, be sure that you are available to be that baby's special, consistent comforting person.

Be empathic. Fussy babies are often quick to feel stress, intense in their responses, and difficult to soothe. Try to understand and anticipate their feelings, such as when they are about to reach overload and fall into sobbing. And remember, this baby is not out to exasperate you! He is surely expressing neediness, and loud cries and cranky protests may be part of his personality style. If you can feel empathy rather than resentment at his distress, you will find it easier to be comforting and reassuring.

Make changes slowly. As you introduce new situations or positions, watch for warning signs of fatigue or stress. Shy babies often get stressed by changes, so give them plenty of warning and lead time before altering activities. Be sure to explain what is happening, what will be going on, and what you will be doing. Take time to help the baby become familiar with the routines, sights, sounds, and play opportunities in your environment, always remembering that this child has difficulty adapting. Pare down the amount of stimulation to prevent fussy babies from becoming overloaded.

Use soothing tones and calm gestures. Your soothing voice is just what a cautious baby needs to relax. Handle the baby smoothly and gently as you change her position or carry her to a new place. Use a quiet, calm voice as you introduce new foods slowly—one at a time and in very small portions. For young babies who have irritable temperaments, try daily massages with nonallergenic oils. Babies are able to calm down after just 10 minutes of loving strokes.

Toddlers:

Be flexible and generous with time. If your fussy toddlers are intent on completing an activity, allow more time for building that block tower or finishing that puzzle. Rather than stopping an activity because it's time for a snack, try putting out treats for a generous period of time.

Provide equipment for high-energy toddlers. Activity level is high for some feisty toddlers. They run and chase about and seem to be on the go all day. Be sure you have rocking horses, space for running, and plenty of tricycles on hand for vigorous play.

Watch for signals of emotional overload. You can help fussy toddlers by tuning in to their body signals. To prevent blowups and tantrums as much as possible, notice when a toddler starts to get stressed or is heading into a difficult social struggle with a peer.

Use distractions. Offer a substitute if the fussy toddler is set on taking a toy away from a peer. Interest her in another activity, such as listening to a story while sitting on your lap if she is disrupting the play of others.

Give toddlers words for emotions. Feisty toddlers need to know they are lovable and can succeed in managing their intense emotions. Give them phrases like “I want a turn” or “I need that block.” When you help them use words instead of shoving, grabbing, or screaming, you are giving them tools to encourage more enjoyable and successful social relations. Feisty toddlers can engage in more active, intense play that will attract friends if you guide them in learning empathy and in building their social skills.

Move toddlers with their friends. When irritable toddlers transition to a preschool group, move several buddies at the same time. Fussy toddlers will feel less upset, more secure, and more comfortable with their peers. ECT

A Letter to Families

Every child has unique temperament traits. Each baby has special tastes, preferences, fears, joys, and ways of responding to people, toys, foods, and events. Some babies are easy to soothe. Some are shy. Others are impulsive. Some have established very irregular body rhythms for sleeping, eating, and urinating. Others have very regular bowel movements and nap times. Sharing your personal observations of your child will help his teacher focus on his individual personality.

Share your baby’s feelings about a new food, a new person, or a new place, such as a shopping mall or friend’s home. Does your baby approach new people with interest and an expectation that this adult could become a new playmate, a reader of stories, or an entertainer? Or does your baby usually react with stranger anxiety and cry if the new person comes on too suddenly or moves too close?

Inform the teacher if you have a high-energy toddler; his teacher needs to know. Your little one may find it really difficult to lie still for a diaper change. Offer the teacher tips on how you distract your toddler with a special routine, such as kissing his fingertips and singing to him while you change his diaper.

Be sure to tell your child’s teacher if your child needs extra time for eating or extra notice that soon it will be clean-up time. Some cautious babies need a lot of transition time between activities. Is your baby one who gets upset if you try to zip him into outdoor clothes quickly when you are in a hurry? Is he happier when you take more time to dress him or bathe him or get him ready for outdoor trips? Some little ones get very upset when they are rushed while they’re eating or changing activities.

Share what you have discovered about your child’s sensitivity to noise, to the texture of foods or fabrics, to lots of toys cluttering the environment. Some babies are fussy. They

are sensitive to clothing materials, such as wool. Sensitive babies will cry if they sense voices or music as too loud. They need a quieter atmosphere. You are the best observer of your baby's responses to sensory overload.

You know your child best. If he needs extra time and hand-holding to get comfortable enough to play in a group of other children, let his teacher know what has worked best for him. Children differ in how much adult help they need to join a group. Some enter into play fairly easily, for example, when approaching a sandbox in which other toddlers are busy digging and babbling. Toddlers who are shy may need a teacher to hold their hand and introduce them slowly into social settings.

Talk about your baby's attention span. Some babies have longer attention spans than others. They can sit and listen to a long story as they point to pictures. Others need more support. If your child focuses better on a picture book if you sit him on your lap or snuggle him against your body, tell his teacher, who can then make a special effort to give him more lap time.

Be sure your child's teacher knows what his preferences are. Some children like their Cheerios, but only if they're in a cereal bowl with milk. Some only want to eat their Cheerios dry in a bowl. The more you share with your child's teacher, the more harmonious the school atmosphere will be for him.

Alice Sterling Honig, Ph.D., a professor emerita of child development at Syracuse University, is the author of many books, including *Secure Relationships: Nurturing Infant-Toddler Attachments in Early Care Settings* (NAEYC, 2002; \$15) and, with H. Brophy, *Talking With Your Baby: Family as the First School* (Syracuse University Press, 1996; \$16.95).